

Parental education and digital skills matter most in guiding children's internet use

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Credit: Lynn Schofield Clark



Sonia Livingstone looks at cross-national variations in how actively engaged parents are in their children's online activities and finds that parents' own skills shape the support they provide for their children. Sonia is Professor of Social Psychology at LSE's Department of Media and Communications and has more than 25 years of experience in media research with a particular focus on children and young people. She directed **EU Kids Online** until 2014 and is the lead investigator of Parenting for a Digital Future. She tweets via @Livingstone_S.

From when children are very young, their parents start to develop **strategies to manage** (or mediate) their present and future digital media use. A key challenge they face is that **digital media** are associated with both opportunities and risks.

Qualitative research (based on interviews and observations) with 70 families with children younger than the age of eight conducted in seven European countries **has already reported** that parents are guided by their already-established styles of parenting and family values, extending these to digital media uses at home as soon as their young children first pick up a tablet or smartphone.

However, their good intentions are often hindered by a **host of everyday practicalities** including limitations of time, space, energy and finance. It is also likely that parents are influenced by the values, traditions and experiences that are grounded in their culture, religion or social position.

In a new report, I and my co-authors divided those 70 families into three groups according to their level of parental income and education.

In lower income, less educated families, we found:



- relatively high device ownership at home
- a generation gap in digital media expertise between parents and children, especially among immigrant families

Home • more restrictive parental mediation strategies regarding digital devices, yet parents who are rather ambivalent and worried about digital media

- an 'ethic of respectful connectedness' in parenting values

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If they are not good at school, the tablet, computers and cartoons on TV are forbidden.

In lower income, more educated families, we found:

- a mix of media-rich and media-poor homes in terms of device ownership
- a variety of domestic circumstances with a high proportion of single-parent households
- fairly confident parents in terms of both their digital skills and thus their ability to prioritise active over restrictive mediation
- still, knowledge of digital media brings concerns, and these parents do also operate some restrictive practices

In a Belgian family with two girls aged 3 and 6, the mother actively guides her children when they engage with media content that she thinks they may find problematic:

The youngest watches DVDs that are actually intended for 6-year-olds with her sister. But that is guided of course. I am here all the time... there are indeed scary moments in many Disney movies that [name of 6-year-old girl] also finds scary... So, then we discuss that.

In higher income, more educated families, we found:

- an 'ethic of expressive empowerment' in parenting values
- a wide range of diverse mediation practices including different strategies to manage restrictions for digital device use
- efforts to promote offline (non-digital) activities for children while limiting digital activities in the home
- parents who work with digital media, or use digital media at home, who often find that their own practices undermine their efforts to limit their children's digital media use

As one German mother of girls aged 6, 1 and a boy aged 4 explained:

It has to be comprehensible for the children... Children have more insight in the process and a better understanding when action and penalty are directly connected... You cannot always enforce the rules but one has to try.

Because of the sizeable group of lower income/more educated parents, however, it is not straightforward to infer parental mediation simply from knowledge of household income. While

both income and education influence parental mediation, it seems that education makes the greater difference. Importantly, and complicating matters somewhat, the relationship between parenting style and parental regulation of digital devices is qualified by parents' own familiarity with digital media. Across all the family types, insofar as parents had particular expertise in digital media, whether because of their work or interests, it appeared that they were more confident of managing their children's digital media activities and more engaged in them.

When looking at cross-national variations, the findings were supportive of the **EU Kids Online country classification**, with Finnish parents being more actively engaged in their children's online activities, Czech parents being generally more passive, while parents in Belgium, Germany, Italy, Russia and the UK favoured restrictive approaches.

For all parents, but especially those who lack confidence, experience or expertise in relation to digital media, the study revealed a need for policy and practitioner support in relation to:

- Knowledge of the benefits of internet use, including lists of recommended imaginative, creative and educational sites and apps, along with public discussion of the criteria by which parents can evaluate these, and tips on how to find them
- The use of technical tools to manage children's internet use for safety purposes, for example, digital safety settings, best practice for passwords, privacy protection and content filters
- Beyond technical tools, many parents would welcome support for easy ways to increase their own digital skills and knowledge; and since parental digital competence and confidence results in more enabling efforts in relation to their children, the benefit of parental skills is felt among the whole family
- Communication strategies to facilitate shared activities using digital devices and parent-child discussions about preferred values and practices and how to address problems. This should include guidance to parents on how to mediate digital media for children of different ages, and how they can also play a guiding role in sibling conversations, since older siblings have a major influence on the play and learning of younger children

The parents surveyed expressed a preference towards receiving this guidance and support from schools and nurseries, which contrasted with how little guidance they actually received from these institutions, and how little they even knew about their children's online activities when not at home. Publicly founded, schools and nurseries have a considerable potential to benefit domestic settings.

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